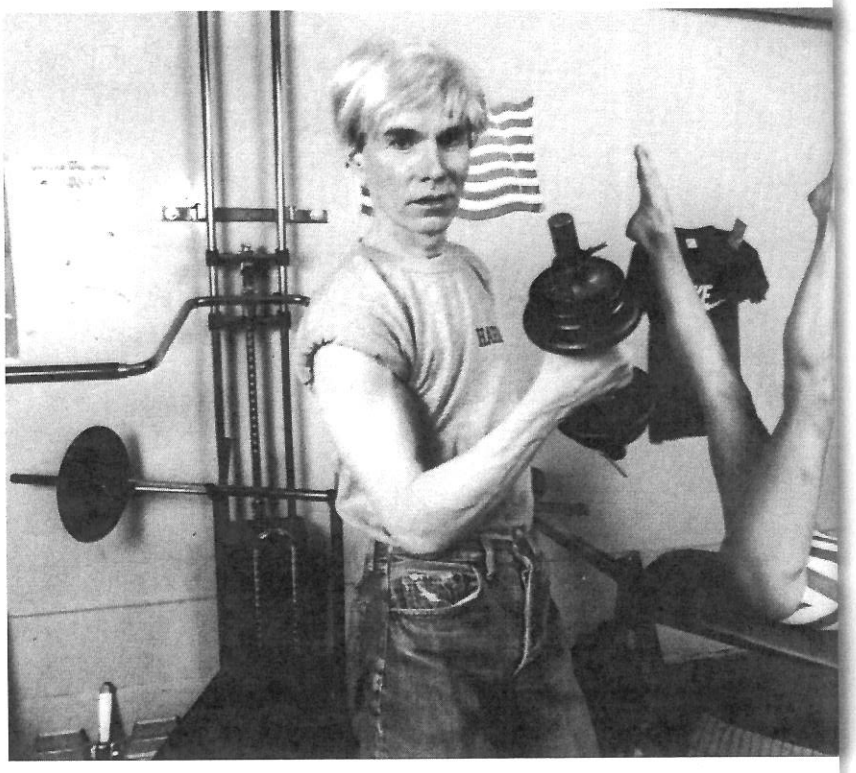

Christopher Makos
***Andy Warhol, Working Out with Soho Training Center Owner, Lidija Cengic, at the Factory, New York,* 1982.**
Courtesy Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles, and Govinda Gallery, Washington, D.C., ' the artist

DRELLA PLAYS THE WHITE MAN

ANDY WARHOL AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF WHITE MASCULINITY

RUTH ADAMS

Andy Warhol was perhaps the ultimate white man. He was arguably the epitome of Western cultural representations of white masculinity – yet while he drew on such stereotypes in the construction of his unique and instantly recognisable public persona, he also expanded and subverted them in subtle and complex ways.

In contrast to perhaps his most famous subject, Marilyn Monroe, the 'whitest' woman, who was used to represent nature and life, Warhol came to signify both culture and death. Images of death were both embodied by Warhol and an important trope in his work.

Dyer reports: "It is said that when sub-Saharan Africans first saw Europeans, they took them for dead people, for living cadavers. If so, it was a deadly perception, for whites may not only embody death, they also bring it."[1] The image of the white man as both dead and bringer of death may seem a fairly reasonable response from non-white peoples who may have experienced the ravages of imperialism and colonialism, but this is an image far more entrenched in white, Western culture; perhaps as the inverse of the supposed fearsome fecundity of the black man. Horror

literature and film often has this image of the white man at its centre, and this is a predominantly white genre. Dyer suggests that horror functions as a catharsis:

> Horror is licensed to deal with what terrifies us – partly by giving it free reign for the safe length of a movie, partly by being low, dismissible and often risible [...] It is a cultural space that makes bearable for whites the exploration of the association of whiteness with death.[2]

This association finds expression in the form of the vampire; the dead white man who feeds off and kills other white people. The association between Warhol and vampirism was one that was made regularly throughout his career. He made a film called *Dracula* and his Factory nickname was 'Drella'. Drella was an amalgam of Dracula and Cinderella and was, as Gerard Malanga recalled; "a homosexual campy fairy-tale thing like the Wicked Witch of the North. Andy was cast as the bad guy in the fairy tale."[3] These vampiric associations arose partly from Warhol's appearance. He was extremely pale and claimed to have been afflicted with vitiligo as a child. He emphasised his pallor with make-up, predominantly black clothing and possibly the most famous head of white hair since Monroe's. His Slavonic origins also added some piquancy to the comparison. While some of the Dracula comparisons were light-hearted, even affectionate, they were generally made by commentators hostile to Warhol, who found his persona and/or his work offensive. Warhol challenged many of the certainties of Modernism, and his very ambiguity and ambivalence provoked a sense of uneasiness, even the 'uncanny', in his critics. Judith Halberstam's description of the Vampire is a spookily accurate picture of Warhol:

> Dracula is otherness itself, a distilled version of all others produced by and within fictional texts, sexual science, and psychopathology. He is monster and man, feminine and powerful, parasitical and wealthy; he is repulsive and fascinating, he exerts the consummate gaze but is scrutinised in all things, he lives forever but can be killed. Dracula is indeed not simply a monster but a technology of monstrosity.[4]

Dyer argues that the vampire myth strikes so deep to the heart of the fear of white men that it must be attributed to non-mainstream whites, 'the other', such as Jews or homosexuals. The vampire bite is a metaphor for the sexual act, but, like homosexuality, it is non-reproductive; it can never result in life and therefore, by extension, must result in death.

Warhol, like Dracula, was often portrayed as parasitic. Many of these accusations arose from his relationships with his 'superstars', his Factory acolytes. Warhol's own marginalised position and his apparent lack of judgement, often taken as affirmation, resulted in a following of other marginalised individuals. His coterie comprised a motley crew of love-starved society debs, drug addicts, drag queens and wannabes, most with a variety of emotional problems. Warhol put this bunch of misfits on show; on film, on tape and in person, and when they almost inevitably self-destructed he simply kept on recording. He was reproached for exploiting other people's misery, encouraging them to spill their messed-up guts for the voyeuristic titillation of himself and whoever else cared to watch. Such accusations were not helped by claims (probably true) that he paid his stars little or nothing for their appearances while he was raking in big bucks. While Warhol was undoubtedly voyeuristic – he admitted as much – his work also suggests that we, the viewer, are equally guilty – we too keep on watching. He attributed his policy of non-interference to a liberal belief that people should be allowed to do what they want – regardless of whether it is 'good' for them. He once said that he would not have prevented Monroe from killing herself if that would have made her 'happy'.

The attempt on Warhol's life in 1968 further served to accentuate his horror film image; he literally came 'back from the dead'. Serious injury made him look even more cadaverous than ever. When he visited London in 1971, Geoffrey Matthews of the *Evening News* described him as looking like "a corpse which has somehow raised itself up off a cold stone slab and walked out of the mortuary."[5] Similarly, Richard Avedon's 1969 portrait of Andy's chest, criss-crossed with snaking scars and sutures, puts

one in mind of another Hollywood horror icon – Frankenstein's Monster.

Associations with death were attributed not only to the more obvious elements of Warhol's oeuvre, such as the *Death and Disaster* series, but also to his apparently more innocuous portraits of *living* people. Jonathan Flatley cites a reported incident when Jasper Johns, having seen Warhol's portrait of Holly Solomon said to her, "Hi Holly... how does it feel to be dead?"[6] Flatley reads Johns' comment as meaning that Solomon had 'died' to become an objet d'art or, less poetically, "an object, or more nearly a commodity, brand 'Warhol'."[7] This death through objectification is, Flatley argues, symptomatic of being famous. Being a public figure is rather like imagining oneself dead or attending one's own funeral. "You get to see yourself reified, eulogised, coherent, whole – and you get to see other people recognising you."[8] Given this, we might see the fact that Warhol started painting the *Marilyns* after her physical death as almost irrelevant; the paintings have as much to say about Monroe's condition during her life as after her death. However, Kirk Varnedoe argues that her death was crucial to another interpretation of the work. With reference to *Gold Marilyn* he says:

> Not only was Marilyn dead when he painted it, but the whole world she stood for was dead. That kind of peroxide, sex-bomb, movie glamour has more to do with the gleaming chrome on a 1957 Cadillac than it does with the [...] squared-off Lincoln Continental that Kennedy was shot in [...] in 1963.[9]

Alternatively, we might see Warhol's portraiture as not only 'bringer of death' but also extender of life. Flatley suggests that Warhol's work can be understood in terms of *prosopopoeia*, which he defines as "the fiction of a voice beyond the grave. It is the trope that ascribes face, name, or voice to the absent, inanimate or dead."[10] Holly Solomon clearly understood the dual functionality of Warhol's portraiture because her gloating retort to Johns was "Long after I'm dead, it will be hanging."[11] Likewise, by transforming newspaper photographs and reports into permanent works of art, Warhol prevents the unknown and largely anonymous victims of

car crashes and food poisoning from simply becoming tomorrow's chip wrappers and endows them with a fame (albeit posthumously) that stretches far beyond 'fifteen minutes'.

Although Warhol perhaps empathised, and even sympathised with Monroe, more than anything he aspired to her iconic status, and perhaps even envied her a little. David Bourdon suggests that it was not so much her untimely death that excited Warhol sufficiently for him to start painting *Marilyns*, but the enormous amount of press coverage that it generated. Warhol realised fairly early in his career that if he wanted to be a star, it would not be enough to simply be an important painter, he would also have to be a 'face'. 'Warhol the artist' became an increasingly essential element of his oeuvre, some said his best work, encouraged by his 'superstars' and on the advice of Ivan Karp, who told him; "You know people want to see *you*. Your looks are a certain part of your fame – they feed the imagination."[12] Warhol set about creating a persona for public consumption inspired by Hollywood's example.

Like Monroe, Andy adopted white hair for maximum transformational effect. He started dying his hair blond shortly after his arrival in New York, but once his hair started to thin significantly he began wearing wigs. The early numbers were grey and fairly naturalistic, but he soon graduated to the, increasingly artificial looking, blond, white and silver versions that became his trademark. While, like Monroe, white/blond hair offered Warhol both transformational and attention grabbing qualities, he clearly couldn't and wouldn't want it to convey the same messages as Marilyn's blond halo. In his book *Big Hair*, McCracken traces a 'periodic table' of blondness from 'bombshell', through 'brassy' and 'sunny' to 'cool' and 'platinum'. While Marilyn's overt sexuality placed her firmly in the first category. Warhol might be said to have adapted the latter two. 'Cool' blondness is a paradox; while at first glance it suggests the same openness and access that bombshell blondness offers, this access is refused. This could be seen as symbolic of both Warhol's persona and his art. They appear glamourous, familiar and accessible at a surface level, but beyond

that surface the way is blocked: "If you want to know about Andy Warhol, [he said], just look at the surface of my paintings and my films and there I am, there's nothing behind it."[13]

Warhol might also be compared with the cool blondes of Hitchcock's movies:

> it wasn't that he wanted them to forswear their sexuality on the screen, what he wanted was a tension between the sexual and the social. He wanted everyday life to be haunted by a sexuality that became all the more powerful for its annexation. Hitchcock began with blondness, the better to communicate a sexual presence, and then he directed the blondes to stand away from their sensuality. He sought to heighten sexuality by distancing it.[14]

Likewise, while Warhol did not actually forswear his sexuality, he certainly annexed it. He was not keen on physical contact, or unmediated intimacy of any sort, and therefore explored his sexuality at a voyeuristic distance. Because he was homosexual, his sexuality was also annexed by society. While the homosexual, like the vampire, is forced to look on from the sidelines, this very liminality makes their presence, whilst unseen, all the more potent and unnerving in the popular imagination.

If Warhol was undoubtedly subversive in his 'cool' blond phase, he abandoned such strategies when he moved into his later 'platinum' phase. McCracken describes platinum as "the colour of choice for society women in New York City."[15] During the late seventies and eighties this is precisely what Warhol appeared to become. The star-struck youth became a fully-fledged star and he swapped avant-garde practices for commissioned portraits, product endorsement, *Interview* magazine and nights out at Studio 54. He moved from the outside to the inside, to wealth and celebrity – and his hair reflected this change in status. Many critics of Warhol see this period as evidence of his 'selling out' and abandoning his principles. On the contrary, this apparent shift was entirely consistent within his commodity logic; Warhol always wanted to be a movie-star, a product, he was simply actualising his ambitions.

Like Monroe, Warhol was often taken to be 'dumb'. His blank stare, his glitzy, kitschy tabloid magazine paintings and his apparent inability to manage responses any more erudite than 'Gee' or 'Wow' all contributed to this image. It was often assumed of Warhol, as of Marilyn, that when they did exhibit flashes of incontestable brilliance it was more by accident than design. The truth was quite the reverse, Warhol's dumbness was part of his carefully crafted public persona; it was a blankness that maintained his mystique and resisted the fixing of all by the most ambiguous meanings to him.

Warhol's 'dumbness' might also be interpreted as related to his assertion that he wanted to be a machine. If Monroe was a sex object struggling to be taken seriously as a subject, then Warhol was a subject that aspired to be an object. In Dyer's schemata it is the fact that whiteness is taken to be the norm, and therefore unmarked and unspecific, an absence, that allows the white man to aspire to the highest point on the Enlightenment's intellectual ideal, the observing subject without properties – that is to say, an object. What fascinated Warhol about Monroe was that the real woman had effectively disappeared behind a screen of representation. This is what Warhol's multiple silk-screens of Monroe show and it also makes sense of Warhol's assertion that one only had to look at the surface of his paintings. Since what he was representing was only a surface to begin with, paradoxically the depth of the paintings lies in their very superficiality. The multiplicity of the images might be interpreted as the many subjectivities that journalists, biographers and fans tried to rehabilitate from Monroe's terminal object, which by their very nature, could never be more than superficial projections upon that object.

Given Warhol's interest in, and awareness of, Monroe's tragic condition in life and death, why would he regard her as aspirational? I would suggest because he realised what Marilyn perhaps did not; that objecthood could be a protective haven as well as a prison. If the properties of Warhol's portraiture were death and rebirth, Daniel Herwitz suggests that film has similar properties and that this was the root of Warhol's obsession with Hollywood:

> Warhol is fascinated with the film star because she dies on screen and is recast as present in an eternalised, 'living', re-presented, past. There she is both herself (with her own qualities) and the film's material. It is as if Warhol's fantasy is to die and become reborn as a film image whose life is replaced by glamour and the gaze of everybody.[16]

In a way, Warhol had found a way to have the fame cake and eat it too. The silver screen works both ways – projecting and protecting. Flatley suggests that Warhol's understanding of this process is made manifest by his casting of himself as 'The Shadow' in his *Myths* series, alongside other iconic figures such as Superman and Mickey Mouse. This painting "allegorizes Warhol's fantasy that [...] he could move into the public precisely as someone *hidden*."[17] The bigger his public profile became and the further removed from its source subject, the more it obscured and protected it. In this respect, Warhol faithfully followed his own advice, advice that he might have offered Monroe:

> You should always have a product that's not just 'you'. An actress should count up her plays and movies and a model should count up her photographs [...] and an artist should count up his pictures so you always know exactly what you're worth and you don't get stuck thinking your product is you and your fame, and your aura.[18]

Warhol is perhaps suggesting here that Monroe's tragedy was a result not perhaps of her objectification, but because she invested too much of her subject in her object and was therefore unable to maintain a necessary critical distance.

The construction of both Warhol and Marilyn's public personas were so complete that they took on lives of their own. Their public personas could be described as their 'doubles'. Doubles have a long history in Western culture and are generally portrayed as the uncanny, something to be feared. In the double the subject perceives both self and non-self, the familiar and the strange. Baudrillard makes a specific connection between the double and death. "A vengeful and vampiric double, an unquiet soul. the double begins to prefigure the subject's death, haunting him in the

very midst of his life."[19] I have already outlined the links between a particular type of double, Warhol's portraits, and death; however, the double can also put something of a strain on the living subject. While Warhol felt that a portrait, a double, a public self should be as perfect as possible, he also knew that it was a hard act to live up to. No doubt playing heavily on his vampiric reputation, Warhol once said "I'm sure I'm going to look in the mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see?"[20] Steven Shaviro suggests that this perhaps was what Warhol wanted to happen, if his reflection would disappear, if he could become simply an image, it would cease to let him down. However, as Dyer argues, the ideas of whiteness, to be nothing, to be invisible is unattainable, a fact that Warhol reluctantly acknowledges: "Day after day I look in the mirror and I still see something – a new pimple."[21] The double that Warhol feared was not a representation of himself (which he found liberating; either in the form of idealised portraits or Alan Midgette acting as a stand-in) but the corporeal original. Try as he might he could never escape this fleshly double, it always returned to haunt him, whether in the form of a pimple or a bullet.

Warhol dealt with many of the fears of the white man (of being death/dead, being non-reproductive, being nothing) not simply by facing them head on, but by attempting to absorb and assimilate them within himself. This makes him unusual in the history of white masculinity as the general trend has been to externalise rather than internalise such fears. These external manifestations have taken many forms from Moby Dick, and Dracula to more contemporary examples such as the androids in the films of Ridley Scott. The android, while a manifest fear (like the homosexual and the vampire it too is unable to reproduce), is also an aspirational figure as it represents purity and absence of affect; it is the observing subject without properties. I have suggested that Warhol shared this aspiration and that his oft-quoted claim that he wanted to be a machine

suggests as much. His assertion that the acquisition of his tape recorder finished off his (already attenuated) emotional life would also seem to point to his aspiration to be machine-like. The fact that Warhol seemed prepared to deny his humanity (his subjectivity) and embrace what are seen as the unattractive, fearsome attributes of the machine is often what unnerves his detractors. He is portrayed, in the words of Philip K. Dick, the creator of Scott's androids, as "the machine, lacking empathy, watching as mere spectator [...] [the] figure which sees but gives no assistance, offers no hand."[22] However, as I have suggested, Warhol's cold, robotic exterior is perhaps not representative of his interior but a prosthesis, a mask, to protect it. Dick again:

> ... the true face is the reverse of the mask. Of course it would be. You do not place fierce cold metal over fierce cold metal. You place it over soft flesh, as the harmless moth adorns itself artfully to terrorise others with ocilli. This is a defensive measure.[23]

Whilst becoming an object has, as Warhol shows, the positive advantage of offering the soft subject a protective shell, it also extracts a price that is higher than most are prepared to pay. While attaining the pinnacle of whiteness, the subject without properties, can offer "an ecstasy to be felt in [...] luminescent representation [...], a luminescence that makes sense in the context of whiteness as transcendence, dissolution [...] and no-thing-ness,"[24] within this ecstasy lurks an anxiety "the desolate suspicion of non-existence."[25] This anxiety is perhaps well founded and its basis is fluently expressed in both Warhol's work and image. Both Warhol and Monroe reached such a peak of cultural construction that, to an extent, it ceases to be relevant whether these constructions emerged from 'real' people. This anxiety is demonstrated in the public's desperate need to construct subjects from the empty images of stars, hence the many, often prurient and intrusive, biographies of Marilyn, Diana, Elvis et al. Monroe perhaps shared such an anxiety and this may explain her reluctance to entirely separate her subject and object. On the face of it Warhol harboured no such anxieties, he seemed prepared to dissolve into his images, to mediate

all his actions and interactions with machinery in order to become more machine-like, to accept the death of his subjectivity with equanimity. However, the screen that he constructed around himself was tough but not bullet proof. After the shooting he put himself back together and claimed that more than ever before he felt that he was watching television rather than living life, but the chinks in his armour were beginning to be visible to those who cared to look hard enough. When Baby Jane Holzer said that she thought that since the shooting, Andy was one of the happiest people she knew, Sam Green snapped back, "He's as badly off as Marilyn Monroe."[26]

In his later years, Warhol also exhibited the characteristics of another model of white male identity – the body-builder. This seems an unlikely role for a famously effete and fragile artist, but a photograph from 1982 shows him working out in a gym, lifting weights and displaying an impressive set of biceps. The statuesque white torso was a familiar image to Warhol as a voracious consumer of gay pornography and muscle magazines (which he maintained were one and the same); but it was only after he was shot that he aspired to become such. No doubt this stemmed partly from a practical desire to improve his physical strength, but may also have offered him psychological comfort. Dyer writes:

> ... a hard, contoured body does not look like it runs the risk of being merged into other bodies. A sense of separation and boundedness is important to the white male ego. [...] a model of white male identity and survival of the self are expressed through fantasmic fears of the flooding, invading character of women, the masses and racial inferiors. Only a hard, visibly bounded body can resist being submerged into the horror of femininity and non-whiteness.[27]

Viva, one of Warhol's 'superstars' and at one time a close friend, maintained that after the assassination attempt by Valerie Solanis he became genuinely terrified of women and that his already strong aversion to physical contact increased: "He was sexually afraid of women before, I mean you couldn't touch him, he would cringe. That could have been an

act, but afterwards he seemed deeply afraid."[28] After one woman had managed to penetrate his screen of objectivity and invade his person, he was not prepared to run the risk of a reoccurrence and hardened both mind and body accordingly.

The picture that I have painted of Warhol implies an interesting contradiction. He is generally positioned within art history as the first genuinely postmodern artist, symbolic of a paradigm shift. This is largely an accurate assessment; he catapulted popular culture and mass media techniques into the fine art canon, embraced commodity culture, was the very embodiment of the 'hyperreal' and abandoned universal truths in favour of everyday banalities. However, his aspiration to culturally white undermines the certainty of this position. To be the highest point of the Enlightenment's intellectual ideal, the observing subject without properties – an object – is surely a Modernist ambition. Likewise his artwork; for all its apparent dissimilarities with Modern art, shares with it an aim to cast an objective eye over the human condition. This ambiguity on Warhol's part can perhaps be attributed, like Monroe's, to his historical position. They were both figures 'on the cusp', signifying, like Warhol's portraits and the movie screen, a process of death and rebirth, the transition from one era to another with, perversely, Monroe representing a death and Warhol, a new life.

NOTES

1 Richard Dyer, *White*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 209.
2 Ibid., p. 210.
3 Victor Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin, London, 1989, 1990 edition, p. 236.
4 Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1995, p. 88.
5 Bockris, op cit., p. 411.
6 Jonathan Flatley, "Warhol Gives Good Face: Publicity and the Politics of Prosopopeia", in *PopOut: Queer Warhol* ed. by Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley & Jose Esteban Munoz, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1996, p. 107.
7 Ibid., p. 107.
8 Ibid., p. 105.
9 Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, MoMA, New York, quoted in Robert Hughes' *American Visions*, BBC2, 22 December 1996.
10 Flatley, op cit., p. 106.
11 Ibid., p. 107.
12 Ibid., p. 113.
13 Bockris, op cit., p. 230.
14 Grant McCracken, *Big Hair: A Journey into the Transformation of Self*, Indigo, London, 1997, p. 97.
15 Ibid., p. 92.
16 Daniel Herwitz, *Making Theory/ Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde*, University of Chicago, London, 1993, 1995 edition, p. 243.
17 Flatley, op cit., p. 113.
18 Andy Warhol, *From A to B and Back Again: The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, Picador, London, 1976, 1979 edition, p. 83.
19 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Sage, London, 1993, p. 142.
20 Steven Shaviro, "Warhol before the mirror" in, *Who is Andy Warhol?*, ed. by Colin MacCabe, Mark Francis & Peter Woollen, BFI, London, 1997, p. 89.
21 Ibid., p. 90.
22 Philip K. Dick, "Man, Android and Machine" in *Science Fiction at Large: A Collection of Essays, by Various Hands, about the Interface between Science Fiction and Reality*, ed. by Peter Nicholls, Victor Gollancz, London, 1976, p. 218.
23 Ibid., p. 204.
24 Dyer, op cit., p. 80.
25 Ibid., p. 45.
26 Bockris, op cit., p. 391.
27 Dyer, op cit., pp. 152-153.
28 Bockris, op cit., p. 379.